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AN ARISTOCRAT.

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A SERIAL STORY.

CHAPTER I.

THE OPENED BOOK.



THE rain fell heavily, persistently, beating against the windows in an insistent monotone—a grayness of sound according with the universal grayness of the tint.

The great room was a very kingdom of shadows; stealthy moving blotches, which grew bolder with the declining afternoon, dragged themselves farther and farther across the floor from their lurking places. Even the fire on the hearth failed to bring cheerfulness, but burned dully and silently, sending no ruddy soldiers to war against the shades.

"Esmé," cried the sick man suddenly, his thin, sharp voice ringing through the room. "Esmé, the words above the door! You have heard me—you will remember? Speak, speak!"

The boy by the hearth answered quietly, making no movement toward the bed.

"I have heard, *monsieur*; I will remember."

"But I lay no charge upon you; remember that also. The son of Lélie, at the forge, he is—and born one year before you. Why must I think of these things? Lélie died in the famine the year I met your mother in Paris. Esmé,

do not let him die of hunger—The words over the door—"

The rain increased in rapidity; a gust of wind drew a fugitive and uncertain flame from the burning logs, sending the light across the boy's gravely delicate face with its unchildish depth of thought. The man in the curtained bed lay silent for a while, his slender, yellow-white fingers picking at the brocaded figures of his coverlet.

"What have I said to you?" he exclaimed abruptly and harshly. "Folly, sick man's folly! Peasant he is, and will be—your serf. Do you attend me?" He made an ineffectual effort to rise. "I say, this peasant at the forge is your servant, Esmé de Gérin, yours; flog him, starve him to submission, set him to the fields. Let him learn to brave me—to look at me in passing eye to eye, as *you* look! He shall crouch as is his birthright. You understand?"

The shadows on the wall quivered, mimicking Esmé's slight movement; the boy's gray eyes refused to meet those which sought them imperiously.

"*Monsieur*, you will be satisfied with what I do," he answered, his clear, contained voice falling strangely across the other's weak vehemence. "It will be better that you trouble yourself with no such thoughts now. The motto over the door—"

"*Plutôt mort que tort!*" cried the man, yet hanging greedily on the boy's words.

"Rather death than wrong," he repeated steadily. "*Monsieur*, I have seen it every day of my life; I will not forget. Do you rest."

"You will carry that burden—you take it from me? I can go with empty hands?"

The boy lifted his head as if an actual weight had fallen on his shoulders.

"Yes," he replied.

With a long sigh the sick man fell back on his pillows.

"You may find the way," he said, the words running oddly together and difficult to comprehend. "I never did, I never could. Wrong, all wrong. But I command nothing, direct nothing; help him or let him starve, as you choose." He paused, then resumed more naturally. "Go, Esmé; send the doctor here."

Esmé rose at once with grave and accustomed deference; approaching the bed, he touched his lips to the restless fingers.

"I shall return, *monsieur*?" he asked.

"No, not until I send," the other answered, drawing away his hand almost fiercely. "Go, send Durand—some one whose face is not a reproach. Go, and—"

"*Monsieur*?"

"Let the *curé* come, also."

The hall into which Esmé passed was even more somber than the bedchamber. In the dull light the two men whom the marquis had demanded moved forward, already prepared for the summons. Both looked a trifle curiously at the quiet young face of Esmé, and the one in black hesitated.

"All is well with you, my son?" he inquired affectionately.

"Yes, *mon père*," came the low reply.

When the door had closed, Esmé crossed to a huge carved chair that stood beneath the oriel windows.

Sitting down, he rested his head wearily against the oaken back.

The last gray afternoon light faded into grayer twilight; night became an imminent menace of dark. It was quite an hour before the room was entered again, an hour during which the boy neither rose nor moved. Even now he

only turned his large eyes questioningly on the man who appeared.

But the doctor did not speak readily—did not speak at all until he had carefully closed the door behind him.

"*Monsieur le marquis*," he began uncertainly; then again, as if the title told all, "*Monsieur le marquis*—"

Esmé started to his feet with a sharp cry of pain.

"Not yet!" he rebelled. "Durand, surely not yet?"

The doctor saluted him profoundly.

"*Monsieur le marquis*," he repeated.

The boy turned blindly to the chair and hid his face in his hands.

The rain fell quietly, regardless of agitation within or without, beating alike on the windows of the hushed room and the shutterless holes of the forge, far down the valley. Over fields and park and humble village, through the whispering château, spread the news that one ruler had given place to another; that across the record of one more autocrat had been written the last word. The new page was turned for the writing, the pen laid in Esmé de Gérin's unresisting fingers.

But for that night the page remained blank; between the two reigns there was a still hour of readjustment.

There is very little more to do for a noble than for a peasant, after the great event. In a week all was ended; in a month Vallon had almost forgotten that the new young lord had not always ruled.

It was in the first two weeks that Esmé rode to the forge in the valley. If he had waited so long it was not because of any doubt or indecision, but simply as a dignified courtesy to the one whose problem he had assumed.

All the huts in Vallon were poor and miserably bare—as indeed they were on almost every large estate in France—but the old forge was more than usually so. A mile down the valley it stood, almost on a curve of the road, dejected, solitary. Often Esmé had passed the place heedlessly; this morning he surveyed it long before dismounting.

The forge was deserted when he entered, except for a boy, who bent over a broken bellows in one corner—a boy rather Italian than French in the depth of his brunette coloring. As Esmé's

shadow fell across the room, he glanced up, then rose precipitately.

"You are Jean, of the forge?" Esmé asked.

"Yes, *monseigneur*," he answered, humbly enough, yet meeting the other's gaze with that level directness which had so chafed the late marquis.

"I am Esmé de Gérin."

The statement was obvious and required no reply; they remained looking at each other intently.

The boy on the threshold stood with unconscious grace of poise, his riding-dress of black velvet with its ruffles of fine lace at the throat and wrist accentuating the delicacy of his profile and soft fairness of skin; the boy opposite him was soiled with the smut of the furnace, and almost in rags. Yet the same type was startlingly apparent in both—the same broad forehead and supple, erect figure, the same arch of brow and curve of cheek. And one gift *madame la marquise* and Lélie of the forge had equally bequeathed their sons: there was no sign of the last marquis's indolent weakness in either face.

It was necessarily Esmé who spoke first.

"You will come with me?" he questioned.

Jean's dark eyes opened in blank astonishment at so superfluous an inquiry.

"I wait *monseigneur's* commands," he returned simply.

Esmé winced and frowned at once; the reminder of his *seigneurie* was not pleasant.

"Do not call me that," he exclaimed. "It is not fitting that you should call me that."

"I ask pardon; as *monsieur le marquis* will."

The movement which brought Esmé across the room was all impulsive.

"Nor that. Jean, there has been a wrong—a mistake; I cannot tell you here. You are my brother, I did not know until a little while ago. We are going to the château; you must learn, study—there has been so much wasted time. Come, I have brought a horse for you."

"*Monseigneur*—"

"No, no; my name is Esmé. Oh, it is true—you will understand later. Jean,"

he held out his hand, "we shall be friends?"

Through all his dazed bewilderment, his utter incredulity, Jean saw the other's earnestness. There could have been no better proof of his gentle blood than the gesture with which he laid his small, roughened hand in the hand offered; no true peasant but would have retreated aghast before the daring familiarity.

The shadow of a sob crossed the highly strung Esmé's face as their fingers unclasped.

"How you must have suffered here! Come, come."

It was the peasant's blind obedience that led Jean to follow, to mount the horse held by an impassive groom, not comprehension of the thing happening. Esmé was absolute master in his domain. The high justice, the middle and the low; the life, safety of limb, and liberty of all those people of the countryside, lay in the hands of this boy not yet fifteen. His doings went unquestioned.

But it was not altogether shyness which halted Jean on the broad steps of the château; the uncomprehended loneliness of years was in his look toward Esmé. At the glance, the face of Esmé, who had lived scarcely less isolated, flashed into response, and he caught the other's hand.

"Come," he urged. "And look! The motto above the door—"

In fact, the morning sun had reached its height, and renewed into sparkling youth the faded gilt letters arched above the arching entrance. Mechanically, Esmé repeated them aloud, and so spoken there fell away the false horror with which the marquis had invested them.

"*Plutôt mort que tort.*"

CHAPTER II.

THE FIRST PAGE.

"*SO—touché!* Have I not improved your parry, my Esmé? Again, again—no, you caught me. Good thrust!"

"You cannot fence if you talk, *très cher.*"

"Can I not? Guard yourself, then. Wait—I believe the button is loose on my foil."

"It is time; I am panting. Remember we ride to Paris to-morrow."

"So we do, since you reach to-morrow your twenty-second birthday. But I am almost sorry to go, Esmé; I love the château."

"And I, sentimental one."

They laughed together, then the graceful and bright-eyed Jean raised his rapier in playful salute before tossing it on the grass and flinging himself beside it. Esmé sat down on a rustic bench and pushed the damp waves of bronze hair off his forehead.

"You are scarcely flushed, while I am suffocating," he declared enviously.

"Patience, it is only June; what will you do in August?"

"I will not fence with you, certainly. You are more difficult than our old *maître d'armes*."

Jean openly laughed at him, lying on the turf with the luxurious abandon of a young fawn, the fine white linen of his ruffled shirt in vivid contrast with his brilliant dark coloring and the warm tints of his round throat. Seven years before, Esmé had appeared the older of the two, now Jean had reclaimed his year of advantage, and a stranger would have been puzzled to decide which was the senior.

"You grow idle, my Esmé; you read too much Molière. Shall I tell you the first place you will visit in Paris?"

"If you will."

"The theater. I doubt if you even wait to salute our Louis and his beautiful Austrian queen."

"And you?"

"I go where you go, naturally."

"What did he in that galley?" Esmé quoted. "I would appreciate that devotion more if I did not know you wanted to go more than I. Here comes Pierre; our quiet hour is over."

Jean rose on one elbow and contemplated the old man descending the terraced walk between the tall marble urns of flowers.

"He is too fat, and his legs tremble," he remarked reflectively. "To think we shall arrive at that! Esmé, when I commence to grow stout, when you observe an unsteadiness in my knees, pray invite me to fence and leave the button off your foil."

"*Monseigneur*," the steward began, before he reached them, "a visitor has arrived and craves the hospitality of *monseigneur* for an hour, while his horse is reshod in the stables. He rides to Paris in haste, to save a life."

"Pierre, do you think we are in a condition to receive guests?" Jean queried with mock solemnity. "Regard only that your *seigneur* is dissolved with heat, and that his rapier has torn my sleeve in a most lamentable fashion. Also, it is past noon—"

"*Monsieur* is pleased to jest."

"Is this stranger a gentleman?" Esmé inquired.

Pierre paused to consider.

"One might say he is a *gentleman*, but not a noble like *monseigneur* and *monsieur*," he explained carefully. "He is—he has not the grand air."

"Have we?" said Jean abstractedly.

The old servant chose to ignore this absurdity, employing the interval in recovering his normal rate of breathing.

"Leave him in the salon," Esmé directed, rising. "We will go there presently. And tell Miron to serve lunch—on in twenty minutes. Come, Jean."

"I must exert myself?"

Esmé laughed, watching the lithe grace of his movement admiringly.

"I wonder," he said, "if you know quite how good to look at you are."

"Oh, I assure you my vanity is colossal. Come in." He slipped his hand through the other's arm. "I am curious to see this passing guest who waits for lunch on an errand of life and death. He is probably *bourgeois*."

But the man who rose to meet them in the salon, a little later, was very far from *bourgeois*. If he had not "the grand air," he possessed in exchange almost too much self-possession, and an air of his own which set him apart from any one class.

Greeting him, his two young hosts felt quite as much distaste as curiosity. His cold face was not pleasant, however powerful; the effect of his light greenish eyes under their black brows, was, at the first glance, startling.

He gave the noncommittal name of Dubois, but it was not until the three were seated in the dining-room that he spoke of his errand.

"There is a poor wretch who will be branded and executed in our kindly Paris," he stated in his composed voice, "unless I reach there in time to save her. Does it not seem unjust to you, *monsieur le marquis*, our method? A fine lady wishes to remove some annoying person—a rival, perhaps, or a husband. She goes to a starving creature in some corner, and offers gold in exchange for—what? A little powdered glass, the juice of a plant; and the troublesome person dies. Who is arrested and put to the question, publicly whipped, and executed? The poisoner? Not at all; her innocent assistant."

"Hardly innocent," Esmé answered.

"Hardly, no. But consider the one who escapes. Suppose," his eyes traveled deliberately over the handsome room, with all its time-mellowed richness of tapestry and carving, its glint of silver and tinted crystal, "suppose M. de Gérin desired, as your younger brother, to inherit all this magnificence, and I sold him a pinch of dust that would remove you. Which of us would you wish to see punished, *monsieur le marquis*?"

"Me, I hope," Jean flashed. "Bah, M. Dubois; your suppositions sicken with disgust. Is it to save such a one you ride to Paris?"

"The accused are not always guilty, *monsieur*."

"No, but there are accusations which stain."

"Pardon if I say that you are still young; to some, mere life is precious."

"Not to me, without the rest."

The translucent green eyes caught the warm, dark ones and held them for a long moment; when they fell Jean was left with a singular giddiness.

"That is well, *monsieur*," the guest answered calmly. "I think you will not live to be old."

Esmé gave an exclamation; Jean laughed abruptly and shook off with impatience the slight sensation that had touched him.

"When the *seigneur* pleases," he said, unconsciously raising his hand to his breast.

Dubois followed the gesture as if his eyes penetrated silk and lace to the tiny gold cross lying over the other's heart.

"Perhaps you are right, after all," he

returned meditatively. "I know that however far science, or what is called sorcery, attain, there is always something beyond."

Esmé moved uneasily, vaguely disturbed; but Jean ended the subject, with the finality of his twenty-three years:

"Black art or white, Voltaire or your Shakespeare, leave us alike with one simple knowledge; we know when we do wrong, and here or hereafter pay. Esmé, let us take our coffee on the terrace; one suffocates in here."

The suggestion was adopted, and the conversation veered.

When M. Dubois's horse was announced his hosts walked with him to that level square of turf where they had fenced an hour before. The rapiers still lay on the grass where they had been tossed; catching their gleam of steel, the visitor stopped.

"A duel?" he suggested.

Esmé smiled.

"With blunt points. Say rather a game."

He glanced caressingly at Jean as he spoke, and the impulsive answer came in the hand which fell over his own as it lay on the rim of a pedestal beside them. Dubois stooped and picked up one of the foils.

"The button is loose," he remarked slowly. "The scarlet geraniums behind you, gentlemen, might have been rivaled by another scarlet. Your foil, *monsieur le marquis*?"

"Mine," Jean corrected.

"Ah, pardon," his eyes went from one to the other. "*Monsieur le marquis*, I am an Arab in many ways—enough, at least, to respect your salt. It would be easier for me to speak to you if you did not refuse belief to things, which, nevertheless, exist; but I will try. I have a gift, a science—call it as you choose—there are hours when I see farther than other men. And when you two entered the salon to-day, I saw the picture of a time to come; a time when you will lie helpless, *monsieur*, while against your will, in defiance of you, M. de Gérin claims your title and place before a great assembly of people—and succeeds in the claim."

Jean uttered a sharp cry, but Esmé's firm grasp held him.

"The only excuse for your insult to my brother and myself, M. Dubois," he answered sternly, "is that you are yourself deluded by mad thoughts. Your horse is waiting."

The man bowed composedly.

"Your faith is admirable," he said. "But what I have seen will take place; your brother's beauty and gaiety cannot prevent the rôle for which he is cast."

With the last echo of the stranger's step, Jean freed his arm from Esmé's clasp and drew back.

"A charlatan, one of those impostors who infest France!" he exclaimed passionately. "Esmé, he has poisoned the air—I am giddy, sick. Esmé, if you believe him—"

"Take care, or we shall quarrel for the first time in our lives," Esmé retorted with amazed severity.

Jean caught one of the rapiers from the ground and held it out to him.

"If you believe, in the years to come, I could do that—if you have ever seen in me the taint he seemed to see, kill me while it is still time. Oh, it is not *bravado*; I mean it, I mean it."

Esmé deliberately took the slender weapon and snapped it across his knee.

"The man has bewitched you," he answered. "Jean, I think you owe me an apology. He is all you have called him, and worse. Would you distrust me if his whim had reversed the prediction?"

"No, no—but I," he passed his hand across his eyes, then looked around the sunny terrace. "In very truth he bewitched me; I thought the sun went out. Forgive me. *Ah, ça*, even yet I cannot shake his green eyes from mine."

"You are touched with fever," Esmé said anxiously. "You are flushed—" He flung his arm around the other and drew him down on a marble seat.

The sun-dial hesitatingly put out the first afternoon shadow. An iridescent peacock came noiselessly across the lawn. After a while Jean's laugh rang out.

"Indeed, it is I who have been reading too much heroic comedy, not you. When I fancy myself offering you that sword, my Esmé, to do instant execution here on the terrace! Let us have no more magicians to lunch."

The last hint of the sinister vanished as Esmé's low laughter joined his.

"We will have the *curé* perform an exorcism of evil spirits, *très cher*. Let us go in; we have still much to arrange for to-morrow. Only beware of Paris, Jean; it is full of mock sorcerers."

They went up the steps between the urns of flowers. But as they crossed the threshold, Jean lingered an instant.

"One laughs," he said under his breath, "yet I meant it, out there. I shall always mean it."

Esmé turned and looked into the liquid black eyes, his own no less tender because a sparkle of mirth still lingered.

"Do you fancy I did not know that, *Don Quixote*?" he asked.

The next morning they rode out to Paris, down through the pleasant, cheerful village where the rosy peasants stood at doors and windows to watch the cavalcade. It is doubtful if the former lords of Vallon would have recognized the place under the Marquis Esmé—the rows of neat, red-roofed cottages, the well-fed and contented people who went about their daily tasks. Perhaps this was the first time the departure of a *seigneur* had been seen with regret, with the earnest wish for his prompt return.

"I am sorry to go," declared Jean, reining in his horse to look back over the valley. "There is our adorable *curé* in his door still; I see the sun on his white hair. I wonder if Paris holds anything so delightful as what we are leaving?"

"We shall find out."

"Yes; wait still a moment—if I were superstitious, I would say that Vallon pulls at my heart as if she knew some harm awaited me beyond."

"Jean!"

"Oh, I do not believe it. Come, come; *en route* for the city of dreams."

They resumed their way, both smiling, both a little sad at the going. But the shadow passed with the first mile.

CHAPTER III.

BELLE AUDE.

ALWAYS for both brothers, when in after days they looked back, the journey to Paris blended into two incidents which stood out against the pleasant routine of travel.

The first was Jean's regretful pause on the hill above the château; the second was when they passed a carriage on the sixth day of their ride, and from its open window a young girl gazed out at them. Only for a flashing instant they saw her, but Jean gave a cry of utter delight.

"Esmé, was ever face so lovely! The very heart of June was she."

"Beyond all loveliness," answered the other more quietly, yet no less interested. "And following this road; perhaps she also goes to Paris."

"Perhaps, only perhaps? I shall see her in every rose we pass. Confess—so will you."

"Perhaps," Esmé mimicked teasingly, and, as usual, they laughed together.

But the face stayed in the thoughts of both.

The late marquis had possessed his house in the capital, as a matter of course; indeed, only at rare intervals had he visited Vallon. During the seven years since his death the house had been closed, but Esmé had sent his steward weeks in advance, and very cheerfully it received the two young men the day of their arrival.

There could be no question of the first duty of the Marquis de Gérin on visiting the city; that evening he and Jean duly went to the palace for presentation to their king.

Outside of obscure Vallon, there was no one living who imagined that Jean was not simply Esmé's younger brother. The marquise had been an orphan and had passed her brief married life at the château; no one knew whether she left two sons or one. So, quite naturally, the announcement was thus made to Louis.

It was a reception night—rarer now than before, in the troubled court—and the great salons were a shifting pageant of color and sparkle. Even greater than usual was the brilliant, moving crowd. But the two new faces were sufficiently attractive to hold the king's attention after the formal words of greeting.

"Your brother does not appear much your junior, *monseigneur le marquis*," he commented in his abrupt manner.

"We are a year apart in age, sire," Esmé replied composedly.

"I remember your father well; he played lansquenet perfectly. You play?"

"Yes, sire."

"Then come to me when the card-tables are set out; I like a new partner. You," he turned with disconcerting suddenness to Jean, "you are a younger brother; does your fortune permit you to gamble, or do you gamble in any case, like most of the chevaliers of the court?"

Esmé made a movement, flushing all over and keenly afraid of the answer. If etiquette had permitted he would himself have told the king that Jean shared equally in all their possessions; that they had never spoken of division.

But Jean's reply was daringly frank and unembarrassed:

"Sire, I never gamble at all. Cards bore me frightfully." And with the last word he smiled brightly into Louis's cold eyes.

The courtiers nearest gasped; the king himself stared, at this characterization of his amusement, then broke into a slow smile.

"Good," he said dryly. "Then I will not martyrize you, M. de Gérin. Campan, here, will introduce you to some of our other diversions. But, come to some of the levees; I fancy we may amuse each other."

The seal of royal favor was set upon the two; they were of the *insouciant* court which refused to see the wave of Mme. de Pompadour's predicted deluge.

When the king broke up the card-game near midnight, Jean made his way through the throng to Esmé.

"I have some one to show you," he declared, with dancing eyes.

Esmé returned the smile and yielded willingly to the guidance.

"How I have employed these hours, which you wasted at lansquenet, my Esmé! This way—behind that column. I have chatted with the queen, walked these sleepy minutes with some of her ladies to whom she presented me, and have learned to know a dozen more or less tiresome gentlemen who announce their intention of invading our house to-morrow. But as a climax—"

They turned the column and found themselves face to face with a lady and gentleman, who were seated on one of the diminutive gilt sofas.

"Mlle. de Beaumarchais," said Jean, "permit me the honor of presenting my brother, M. le Marquis de Gérin."

The girl of the carriage-window, the wonderful face of rose and pearl, the violet-purple eyes beneath the snow and gold of high-piled, powdered hair—that was what the startled Esmé saw as he bowed over the small, fair hand.

"My father was a friend of your father, *monsieur le marquis*," responded the most delicious of voices. "M. de Gérin has assured me that it is eminently suitable that we three should be so likewise."

"*Mademoiselle*, it is not only suitable—it is necessary to existence after having seen you," Esmé replied, catching her playful intonation. "And my brother can tell you that this is not the first time we have been so fortunate."

She laughed.

"M. de Gérin has already told me of an epic of the road to Paris. But pardon, *monsieur le marquis*; let me make known to you my cousin, M. de Château-Leclair."

The gentleman at her side rose to acknowledge the introduction, and the glances which met somehow missed friendliness. Almost at once he moved away, and Esmé took his place; Jean remained leaning against the column opposite.

All three were young and gaily animated, all three accustomed to the exaggerated gallantry of the day; the next half-hour sped winged. But some undernote of sincerity, some grace lent by clear thoughts, made *mademoiselle* regard the two not quite as she did the others who had amused her that evening. For, with all her youth and flowerlike innocence, Aude de Beaumarchais was a daughter of the court, and had heard many things.

There was little advantage to give either in this first interview. Jean's dark richness of tint and line was perhaps the more striking; his splendid dress accorded well with his singular radiance of youth. But, in exchange, Esmé possessed a sweet tranquillity of expression and regard, a blending of strength and gentleness infinitely winning. Years of autocracy had given him a quiet stateliness that both charmed and impressed.

When the hour of parting came, Aude might truthfully have said she was a little *éprise* with both.

They took her to Mme. de Beaumarchais together. Esmé asked and received permission for both to call. He it was, naturally, who conducted *madame* to the coach, while Jean followed with Aude.

"You have the most beautiful of names, *mademoiselle*," Jean asserted in the rosy ear, as they made their way slowly down the crowded steps. "Forgive me—I heard *madame* pronounce it, and the sound set a thousand golden fancies fluttering their wings in my heart."

"Why?"

"Why? You do not know the legend of Belle Aude?"

"No—yes. She was Roland's wife."

"Not his wife, *mademoiselle*, his betrothed—the sister of his friend, Oliver. When the news came of the death of the twelve peers at Roncevalles, Charlemagne sent for her and offered her his own son in marriage." He paused to guide her through the thickest press.

"Well, *monsieur*?" she urged as they went on. "She refused?"

"She refused without words, *mademoiselle*. When the emperor told her of Roland's death, before all the court she fell like a snapped lily and died."

"You think I would be so faithful? *Merci, monsieur*."

"For the right Roland you would. Ah, for that who would not brave his Roncevalles!"

She laughed, betrayed into a blush. They were very near the coach now, moving between rows of pushing, staring people; the street in front filled with rumbling carriages, gorgeous lackeys, and bawling link-boys with torches or lanterns.

"*Mademoiselle*," he commenced again, then gave an exclamation.

"What is it, *monsieur*?"

"That man over there—there by that torch. You are a Parisian; you know him, *mademoiselle*? The one with the light green eyes—"

She looked and shivered, startled.

"Who does not know him? That is Cagliostro; the man who they say is immortal, who was seen here sixty years ago as young as he is to-day. He spent some years in the Bastille for the affair

of the queen's diamond necklace, and has returned now from England. It is hinted that he was an accomplice of the woman who was executed to-day."

"Of what horrors are you speaking?" Esmé inquired, turning and offering his hand to put the girl in the coach. "The execution? It spoiled our first view of Paris."

"You saw—"

"Only the crowds returning. Still, it was not pleasant."

"She deserved it," *madame* commented from within.

"Undoubtedly. But the same purpose would have been attained by hanging her. I do not believe in unnecessary suffering."

Aude's soft fingers tightened ever so slightly on Esmé's as her mother turned to Jean.

"Nor I," she murmured hurriedly. "Once, at our villa in Brittany, my father had a peasant who stole game from the park—I cannot tell you; perhaps you can guess enough. You do not treat your peasants so, *monsieur*?"

"No," Esmé replied simply, but his serene glance made the monosyllable more satisfying than any elaborate denial.

"And now?" asked Jean, as the coach rolled away. "Now, my Esmé?"

"What you will, *très cher*. Home?"

"Yes. *Ah, ça*, I know now what color are Lucifer's eyes."

Esmé regarded him, half laughing, half surprised.

"What, then?"

"Green—light green. There is our own carriage. Do you realize that we have ended our first day in Paris?"

The days that followed were crowded and very pleasant. The routine was slipped into unconsciously; the visits to the palace, the hunting-parties in the forests of Versailles or Fontainebleau, the evenings in witty salons or at the play.

In July the court removed to Versailles for the summer, and by especial invitation the two De Gérins went also. Louis had conceived a marked liking for both brothers, particularly the sunny, daring Jean.

"You are the only *young* noble in the court," the king said to him one day.

"I have need to remain young, sire,"

Jean replied blithely. "I have been told I would die before age reached me."

"Who told you that?"

"Cagliostro, sire."

"If Cagliostro said it, it will happen, De Gérin," drawled Château-Leclair, who was standing near. "His predictions never fail."

"I allow him that one, then; but in one other I will disappoint him," Jean retorted with a shrug.

The two crossed looks that were equally antagonistic. This sallow, *blasé* cousin of Aude was Jean's one dislike.

"More prophecies?" Château-Leclair queried. "Cagliostro must find you interesting."

"Very probably," interposed Louis. "I have observed others who find M. de Gérin interesting. Where were you and the marquis last evening, Gérin?"

"In the garden with *madame* the queen, and her ladies, sire," was the demure response.

The allusion to Aude's neglect of her cousin and preference for the two brothers was only too plain. Château-Leclair reddened with helpless anger.

For Aude was at Versailles also, and each day the sympathetic friendship between these three trembled on the verge of something deeper. Never was a more delightful lingering place than the fairy-like courts and gardens in the drowsy summer weather. They lived from hour to hour, the future a golden mist on the hills of the years, as yet too far away for thought.

Perhaps of the trio only one was unconscious alike of himself and the others, of the inevitable result. But at last, some trifle—a touch, a glance—awoke him also.

Two months after their arrival at Versailles, Jean came one evening into the room where Esmé sat reading. He was a little pale, and stopped by the table instead of flinging himself into his usual seat.

"Esmé," he said quite calmly, "I am going back to Vallon to-morrow. I hope you will not mind too much."

Esmé closed his book and looked at the other.

"Why?" he asked with equal quietness.

"Because, I have been stupid, unseeing, long enough. But I did not see before—you will believe that. I am not given to self-analysis. You love *mademoiselle*, Esmé; do not try to deny it."

"Why should I deny it? And why should that send you back to Vallon?"

Jean lifted his head with a quick breath, his great, black eyes not swerving from the gray ones opposite.

"Because I love her also, and she loves neither of us yet. If you had not brought me to Paris, she would have loved you before now; if I had come alone, she might have cared for me. I am trying to be truthful, Esmé—you will not misunderstand. There is still time, I know that; I have done no harm yet. And so, I am going back to Vallon in the morning."

"Jean," said Esmé very gently, "do you think I also have not longed to go to Vallon, leaving you?"

"Never," Jean cried in passionate refusal. "Esmé, do you think I could bear that? Oh, I have you—there is no one, not *mademoiselle*, who could give me one hour worth living if I knew you suffered. It is not gratitude I offer you, the miserable payment of good with good; I do not say, 'I owe you a debt, take this sacrifice.' I keep no balanced account, like some tradesman. Right or wrong, I do not that. But I love you, and I go to Vallon glad at heart. I am proud in my going, Esmé, proud as one who gives a costly jewel and delights in the price. When you think of me, think so—after I have gone."

The two beautiful, firm faces were very bright in the lamplight; kindled from each other never was the resemblance between them so visible.

"You could do that," Esmé answered steadily, "and perhaps I could also, although I might not give with your royal grace, Jean. But I believe we can do what would be broader still, what would be a more trying strain for a common love—as it is easier to accomplish one great deed than to live through the fretting troubles of every day. We will continue as we have done; we will force *mademoiselle* to choice by no trick of absence or deception. Would either care to win so? No. Let her have full judgment; you said, rightly, that as yet

she loves neither. And if she chooses me, I will accept the decision; if you, I will ask her of Mme. de Beaumarchais for you. We are large enough to do this, *très cher*?"

He had risen and they had found each other's hands.

"I would rather go to Vallon," Jean answered curtly.

Esmé smiled with his exquisite tenderness.

"Of course, and I. Still, we must consider first *mademoiselle*. Moreover, if I were compelled to give up her or you—"

"Esmé!"

"I am afraid it would be *mademoiselle*."

So Jean stayed.

Summer melted into autumn; faded leaves fell rustling through the paths and gardens, the advance-guard of snowflakes to follow. By and by the reluctant court went back to stormy, sullen Paris.

But Audé showed no sign of ability to decide between her two lovers; the only change was that Château-Leclair lost hope, even, and went into the country for a journey of weeks.

CHAPTER IV.

LÉLIE OR MARQUISE.

"MY reward, *mademoiselle*, for teaching you that new figure? You promised the first pavan."

"You are alone to-night? *Monsieur le marquis*—"

"Playing lansquenet, of course, that poor Esmé."

"The king is not here yet?"

"No, but he bade Esmé wait in the alcove, where, meanwhile, he plays with the Comte d'Artois and your cousin."

"I am sorry."

"*Mademoiselle*?"

Audé moved restlessly, looking up into the dark, brilliant face.

"*Monsieur*, my cousin hates you, and still more the marquis."

"I am desolated; but Esmé is there at the command of the king, who does not hate him."

"The king is even more attached to you. You make him gay, which is rare enough for him in these days of anxiety."

"The king is too good. *Mademoiselle*, it is not he who drives France to rebellion. *Ah, ça,*" he shook his head impatiently, "of what are we speaking on an evening when the court is supposed to forget the outside. Permit me to have the distinguished honor of reminding you that my pavan—that pavan for which I have counted the hours—is escaping."

She did not answer his smile, but held out her hand impulsively.

"M. de Gérin, we are friends a little, not just to play. Never mind the dance; go to your brother until the king comes. I am afraid—my cousin returned to-day from his journey and spoke vaguely of some harm to you both. I would like you and the marquis to be together this evening."

Jean bent his head to the small fingers.

"I will go; I hold your graciousness in my heart forever and ever, *mademoiselle*. I will leave Esmé no more to-night—not even," his eyes laughed into hers, "not even if I have to play lansquenet."

"Take care," she warned, all her dimples dancing out. "If you play with any one else after refusing the king, he will never pardon you."

"Oh, he is used to pardoning me; I need it so often. But I expect to arrive at no such extremes."

The alcove where the three gentlemen were playing was at the end of the salon, from which it could be separated by heavy curtains, at present looped back. The king's chair was still empty when Jean came up, and Château-Leclair was sullenly shuffling the cards.

"You, Gérin!" exclaimed the Comte d'Artois jovially. "Come, watch only how luck favors your brother to-night. A woman she is and fascinated by his *beaux yeux*. How much have you lost, Château-Leclair?"

Esmé looked up with his affectionate serenity of glance, its welcome slightly touched with surprise.

"I have come to watch, *monseigneur*," Jean returned, sitting on the arm of a chair near by. "Perhaps—I mention it merely as a possibility—you may convince me that cards are interesting."

"Hardly, if the king could not," smiled the king's youngest brother.

"Hardly, indeed," Jean admitted.

No one observed the man who had entered the alcove from the rear and who lingered amusedly in the shelter of the portière as one who knew his appearance would check the conversation.

"You did not play at Vallon?" Château-Leclair inquired, with a singular insolence of tone.

Jean raised his eyebrows.

"No, we had graver employments, dear sir."

"Ah, such as acquiring your education, I suppose?"

"Surely; learning the self-control so necessary to a gentleman."

"We are waiting for you, Château-Leclair," Artois interposed. "Come, come; the marquis lost, last night, without a change of color."

But Château-Leclair let his cards lie on the table.

"Not yet, *monseigneur*," he answered, vindictiveness unsteady his voice. "Since you appreciate so much the marquis, let me relate to you an interesting anecdote that I heard a few weeks ago when chance led me through his estate at Vallon. Fancy only that M. Jean—he has really the right to no other name—is merely the son of a peasant on the marquis's land. Consider the benevolence which could raise one's serf to a position beside one, and even call him brother—"

The other three men were out of their chairs together, equally white with varying emotions; but quicker than any retort was the forward movement of the listener behind the curtain.

"That will do, *monsieur*," said Louis harshly. "I do not choose to have such use made of my card-room, or such conduct among my guests."

"Sire—"

"You may retire, M. de Château-Leclair. I have no doubt that M. de Gérin will lay aside his objection to lansquenet sufficiently to take your place for this evening."

"Give me one moment, sire," Esmé said, detaining the retreating Château-Leclair by a gesture. "Since this has gone so far, permit me to say that Jean de Gérin has every right to the name he bears. He is the son of the late marquis by a marriage contracted two years before that with my mother."

"Esmé!" Jean cried in sharp pain and warning.

"Two years *before!*" exclaimed Château-Leclair, forgetting all etiquette in his excitement. "Then, if your tale is true, he is the marquis, not you."

"Yes," Esmé answered quietly.

Louis looked from one to the other in the hush.

"Artois, close the curtains," he ordered, "we attract the attention of those without. *Monsieur le marquis*, you may explain yourself first."

Without a word the Comte d'Artois obeyed, drawing the heavy purple draperies. The king took his seat behind the table covered with scattered cards.

"Sire, the story is simple enough," Esmé said reluctantly, yet with faultless dignity. "My father loved a young girl on his estate; a peasant, yes, but a good woman," his eyes went to Jean with indescribable tenderness. "I need not pretend that he meant to make her his wife, or that she expected it—her helplessness must be remembered. But he did so, in a freak of utter waywardness—a challenge to his own parents, with whom he had quarreled. When realization returned to him, he kept the affair secret until an hour before his death. The girl lived less than a year after the marriage; three months after she died he married Mlle. Esmée de Conde."

"You learned all this?"

"Sire, my father told me the night he died."

"It is for me to tell the rest," Jean said, taking a step forward, his beautiful, fearless eyes on the king's. "Sire, my brother did what no one else in France would have done—he brought me home and told me the truth. There was no one who knew, except him, nothing to force his speech. And when I was nineteen he offered to yield his place and rule to me."

Artois caught his breath; Château-Leclair put his hand on the back of the nearest chair, staring wordlessly at the two.

"Go on," Louis directed briefly.

"Is there more to say, sire? He is the marquis, by birth, by nature, by the grace of Heaven. I—I who am half peasant, who, but for a caprice of chance would have been disregarded as unworthy of

notice, I to take his place? Sire, if ever I had any claim, I lay it aside. If I have not the right to do that, I will assuredly find some way to remedy the accident that placed me in his path."

Not Esmé, not Artois, not Louis himself was more purely patrician than the lad who faced them in his brave sincerity. Only with her beauty had Lélie of the forge tempered the old race. And the stately humility of bearing could not hide the pallor of bitterly wrung pride.

It was a moment before the king spoke.

"M. de Gérin," he said gravely and very kindly, "you have the undoubted right to yield to your brother your privilege of eldest born; if necessary, I confirm it. This matter is ended. Gentlemen—Château-Leclair, I caution you especially—I forbid any further mention of this affair. Understand me; if this becomes public I shall know where to demand an accounting. We will play lansquenet; *monsieur le marquis*, you are my partner, I believe. Take your seats, *messieurs*. Château-Leclair, you may throw back the curtains as you go out."

Esmé obeyed, white and silent. As Jean moved to his place his eyes crossed those of the retiring Château-Leclair, and the same thought passed between.

Not without profit had Louis, for a lifetime, observed his fiery court; catching the exchange of glances, his eyebrows went up a trifle. When the party separated he detained Jean for an instant.

"There is an edict against dueling, Gérin," he said dryly.

"Yes, sire."

"Pray remember it."

Jean bowed, almost too submissively.

"Come home," Esmé murmured at his side. "Jean, Jean, come home; I have hurt you—"

"Not me—yourself," Jean retorted. "Why did you not let them believe—what they chose? Esmé, what is my pride to yours?"

They did not speak again until they were in the carriage, and, indeed, nearly home, when Jean laughed a little strangely.

"Esmé, do you remember Cagliostro's saying at Vallon? Do you fancy he meant to-night?"

"No, hardly, since you refused, not

claimed, your title," Esmé answered, startled. Then, recovering himself, "you have no faith in that nonsense, Jean?"

"I suppose not. At least, I would have none if he had not Lucifer's eyes." He laughed again, but more naturally. "Let it go; after all this cannot matter very much, since so few heard. Do you know, *mademoiselle* sent me to you this

evening? I think she feared some danger to you, my Esmé."

The gleam of a street-light caught a flash of color as Esmé laid a jeweled hand upon the other's.

It was at five o'clock the next morning that Jean and the Vicomte d'Allard drove beyond the city to meet Château-Leclair.

(To be concluded.)

WIDOW McGAFFERTY OF CALABASAS.

BY H. C. CARR.

A SHORT STORY.

WHAN-N-NG! went a bullet over Carmichael's head, and struck with a thud in the trunk of a cottonwood about a foot above his sombrero.

Carmichael dropped on his hands and knees, and peered cautiously through the half-grown barley at a woman with a rifle across the gulch.

"That widow is learning to shoot a little too well for the comfort of the neighborhood," muttered Carmichael to himself.

Whan-n-ng! Another bullet clipped through his hat, and he dropped flat on his stomach.

Whan-n-ng!

"I guess that last one was just for luck," said Carmichael, as the third bullet went singing through the barley.

But there was an answer to the third bullet. From the chaparral beyond his cabin came the stricken cry of a child. Carmichael saw the widow stare out across the field. Suddenly she threw down her rifle, and her agonized scream froze the blood in his veins.

The third bullet had found a wee runaway—her baby.

A long time before the Widow McGafferty ever heard of Calabasas, which is in the heart of the Santa Monica Mountains, there was a surveyor who

was in a hurry. He wanted to get home for Christmas, and his survey lines didn't fit.

A spring of water had been left in dispute between two sections of land. The claim upon which the Widow McGafferty settled with her little children overlapped the next claim. She had fought three predecessors to Carmichael, bullet for bullet, and had won. The three men whom she drove off agreed that she was a demon; they didn't know she was pitifully afraid.

Carmichael was an ex-sergeant of the cavalry, who bought the disputed claim for a song. He found out why it was so cheap when the widow appeared at her kitchen door and took a pot-shot at him. He did not shoot back, like the others.

Carmichael saw her plowing, with her little children running along in the furrows behind her. He saw her watering the stock from the wretched water-hole; she had to lift every bucketful back over her shoulder, and was drenched to the skin.

She had been two years at this drudgery before she learned about the mistake in the survey—when they tried to take away her rights to the precious spring. Carmichael was sorry for her, but he didn't intend to be chased out of Calabasas by a woman with a rifle. He